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Oral Interview of Aimee Schramm by Jenny Meagher for a Project on Activist Women in South Berwick, Maine

Aimee Schramm

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Oral interviews for a project on the history of activist women in South Berwick, Maine

Interviewer: Jenny Meagher (JM)
Interviewee: Aimee Schramm (AS)
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Note: loud windchimes in the background of audio

[transcript begins]

AS: …country men were coming in with their boots and their red overcoats, red with black, you know that plaid kind of thing, and after a while that place smelled so—of foul boots, oh it was awful, that was awful. I had one sad experience. There was a wonderful old gentleman. He was 90 years old and he was—very much for the town manager. Bob Weiss was wonderful with people and he had been very good to 'em. And I went to pick him up and he was an old Yankee. Independent. Very tall and thin and his hair, had long wonderful long thin hands. And I came around to help him get in the car and he brushed me away. And the car, I had the car door opened and it slammed on his hand. And it cut it all the way across here. And old, old hands are like paper. And it turned black and he was bleeding and I was frantic. Ah! Well I had, then I finally did get him in the car and got him down the Town Hall and we got him to a doctor and took care of him but I never forgot that. Oh—what a horrible feeling that was—whooh. But he, he—90 years old he came in and voted, even with the hand.

JM: Wow.

AS: That's something, yeah.

JM: Now, you were taking charge of driving people. I noticed in one of the signs that said transportation providers.

AS: Yeah, I drove people. I also was on the phone. I also helped with the—Oh, wait, Carolyn, Carolyn's husband, myself, Natalie Goodwin, uh, Esther Holmes.

JM: Louise Folsom?

AS: Pardon me? Louise Folsom. That was a small coterie that were really focused on centrally running [unclear]. And Bob. And his wife Dora. Who was a very interesting person and still is. A very good friend of ours. She would always play devil's advocate. And we bring up a position and then she'd played the devil's advocate and it was a lot of fun. It was it was a wonderful academic exercise. I mean we enjoyed it. It was fun. But, uh, I was very firmly committed to being involved in a place that I loved. And I began to love the town. It had everything I wanted. And it still is a wonderful town. And I would say right now there's very little of that left. There a few pockets of it but not much. Just people became too emotionally involved, I guess. I had one experience that is off the record. I don't believe in telling things off the record but this, just shut it off.

JM: Okay. [shuts off tape recorder at request of interviewee]

JM: [returns to interview] I'm just wondering, um, Rick was saying that for the library, the town manager battle, the anti-nuclear demonstrations. The majority of people who think in that kind of liberal way, um, if you'll excuse the word 'cause it is pretty ambiguous, but that they are mostly women in town. And in fact most of the people—

AS: It's true.

JM: —that she knew in town, that she spent time with, in those kind of community organizations were women—

AS: It's true.

JM: And, and she couldn't—I mean I had some ideas why and I was kind of throwing them out and she said oh yeah, that sounds right but I mean I'm just wondering I think maybe as an outsider, you're not an outsider obviously anymore, but maybe when you first came—

AS: I'm still a carpetbagger. I'll always be a carpetbagger. In their mind, not in mine.

JM: Okay, okay.

AS: Well, we started the League of Women Voters and they're all women. I know, I think we initiated then we dragged our husbands into it, kicking and screaming but that's about it.

JM: Um-hum.

AS: Yeah. I don't know whether Ruth's, yeah, I guess Ruth's husband was in it. I don't think he was too active in it. But Maury Blouin was very active in it and so was my husband.

JM: Um-hum.

AS: Very active. What else?

JM: Well do you think, I mean, why do you think that women have, in this town, have been the ones that seem to really get these things going?

AS: [unclear] Could be a million reasons. Probably, I don't know, I think Ruth Howarth is a very well-educated woman. Most of the women were very well-educated. But maybe…

JM: Were the women not working, a lot?

AS: Well, um, oh no, I wasn't teaching then. I was going over the university and finishing up. I can't tell you. Except that possibly they were better educated.

JM: Yeah. And what would you say activism is?

AS: What is it?

JM: Yeah. How would you define it?

AS: That's quite a question. You mean political activism.

JM: Can be political, can be service-oriented. It's different for different people.

AS: I think it's a commitment that's placed above self. Probably. Where, where you're willing to, where you have a deep commitment to the promotion of the, of the American dream. That would be for me. And that's my feeling about it. I think we had one of the greatest dreams in the world and we're throwing it down the, down. Throwing it away. It's breaking my heart. I see this country going down a slide so fast it is tragic. With incompetent people, with uncaring people, with greedy people, with power-hungry people.

JM: Um-hum.

AS: I could name a Dole, and Bush, and Reagan and the whole bunch of them. And I'm, the Democrats are no better.

JM: Um-hum. Do you feel that they are democratic?

AS: It's a Democrat with a capital B. They're no better. Capital D. It's sad. That's the best I can do.

JM: Yeah, no that's fine. It's just your opinion. It's interesting. Different people have different slants on it.

AS: But I think it has to a, a willing to—not be self-promotional and not look for reward. That's the important thing. The reward is in the doing. That sounds very idealistic but I'm a, I'm an idealist.

JM: And it's interesting the way different women, I think women especially, well not just especially, women do have to take a different slant to activism because there was so much involved in women's lives in the home and—

AS: I think—Yep, go ahead.

JM: I was just wondering when you said that it has to be above the self. Does it mean that activism comes before family?

AS: Yeah.

JM: Or how do you feel—

AS: Well it's for family. I mean it comes above family in that it takes the time and the commitment but it's essentially for the family, to keep the system that works so beautifully.

JM: Because I know for Ruth she stopped activism for a while or so she said. I believe that she does—

AS: Yeah.

JM: —lots of other things in between—

AS: Oh, sure she does.

JM: —but, but stops you know more, um, concrete activism I guess, for her family? Do, would you have done that or have you done that?

AS: I always did it. My family never knew were neglected. I always involved them in it. I had my daughter running around dropping off these white papers. To this day she's an activist too, down in Alabama, yeah. Yeah. It rubs off, after a while.

JM: And, uh—

AS: I wish there were more—Well of course the women's movement I suppose now is primary in bringing women—But it was a gradual development of women's independence over the years I guess. But I always was independent. I was brought up by a grandmother who taught me to be independent. So that may be the thing for myself. I was encouraged. In fact, when I taught, that was the important thing to me, was to be challenged. By students. Not stand up and tell them what I thought.

JM: Um-hmm.

AS: I thought a teacher was a facilitator not a lecturer from yellow, old yellow sheets.

JM: Um-hmm.

AS: You see I'm also radical, probably. Huh, whatever, however you define that. I don't know. It's an exciting world. I wanted kids to be excited about it, you know. It's a wonderful life. They asked me once why I didn't take marijuana. I said I'm high on life why should I take marijuana? It's a waste of time.

JM: Um-hmm.

AS: Stupid. What else?

JM: Um, well I'm just wondering. You mentioned your grandmother. I was just wondering how she taught you that independence.

AS: How she thought? Well, she let me make up a lot of my own mind about things I wanted to do. She would say, Now if I were to do it I would do it this way. She would never say you ought to do it that way.

JM: Um-hmm.

AS: And I brought my daughter up that way. And I deal with people that way. If they ask me for advice I say, 'Well, this is the way I would do it. It's up to you the way you want to do it.'

JM: Um-hmm. And, um, I'm just wondering what movement you would identify yourself with more or what cause or— 'Cause, you have to—

AS: Social causes more than anything. I think the poverty—and children. My, it would always be children. Young people. I mean teaching to me was the greatest. And still is. I love it. I think, well you know, that's—democracy depends on an educated electorate. And it's a very tenuous string. And what's happening now with less, fewer than 50 percent of the public voting it's a very serious thing. Another deeply disturbing thing to me.

JM: What kinds of things are you doing now in town?

AS: Pardon me?

JM: What kinds of things are you doing now in town?

AS: I'm chairman of the South Berwick Historic District Commission. I'm chairman of the Jewett-Eastman Memorial Committee that bought the library building. And I also, I do all the maintenance work on it. I'm on the, let's see, Rocky Gorge board. I'm on the board of the

Old Berwick Historic Society. And, what else. I do a lot of things independently in town. Sort of guiding quietly. I like to be the power behind the throne. But I just never want any, I don't want publicity. I don't want recognition. I want the joy of doing it. And I'm making it a better country. I wish everybody did it. I taught my kids how to write to their congressman. They almost threw me out of school for that. Big deal. I got everything I could get on the Panama Canal, for and against. Put it in the library. Let them read it. Never made any commitment to them. Showed them how to format the letter. It was interesting. And there was a, ah, a senator or a congressman in Massachusetts—in New Hampshire who voted to give the canal back. And one of my students wrote him a letter and about a week later she came in and, she didn't walk in she floated in. He had called her the night before personally to thank her for the letter. I had converts in that classroom for writing letters from then on. It was a wonderful experience. Oh, was I thrilled. What was his name? He lost his, he was voted out. New Hampshire is a very conservative state. And he was voted out. Can't remember his name. But to call her personally. Whoo, she was so thrilled. But, well I think that's what school's about.

JM: Yeah.

AS: The funny thing is the letter writers, it came out just about the same as it did on the national level in proportion. Isn't that interesting. So, it was a microcosm of the whole country. Even in, I taught in Dover then and that's New Hampshire. Conservative state. I had a lot of interesting experiences. Once I closed that door, I was the boss. What's the three big—immorality, insubordination, I don't know what the other thing is. There's three things, but anyhow I didn't have any of them. So, what else?

JM: Um, let's see. I'm, I'm just curious. I'm hearing a lot about, with the Hasty family, I've been hearing a lot about the hardships of women in the past.

AS: I guess a—

JM: Two generations ago how hard life was for women. It seemed like there were a lot more of physical hardships—

AS: You know reading Gladys Hasty Carroll's book might give you that.

JM: Um-hmm. I have been.

AS: You have it? I think it would give you background on it.

JM: Yeah, but I'm wondering about women's perspectives today. Women who have seen things throughout their lives. And maybe just your opinion on—

AS: And probably that's why we're more involved. Although, I never had that. We always had— We all were pretty well off so. I never did any housework. But I imagine a woman in this town would be pretty well tied to the house.

JM: Anything that was a hard—their greatest hardship?

AS: I would think so.

JM: What about being in the house?

AS: Well, I suppose they went by horse and wagon in the turn of the century. So, there's very little communication where— I'll tell you a story. A friend of mine, you remember I have a friend here who was 90 years old who died last year. And she told me that her father took her for a ride in a sleigh up to North Berwick and failed to cover her face and by the time

she got up there she had a very rugged complexion. And she told me that was what it was. She had a terrible case of frostbite. They, she was very exposed to all the air. And they were fairly well off. They were one of the first families.

JM: Wow.

AS: But she had, they had cows. They had two, uh, there were Irish servants in South Berwick quite a bit. Sarah Orne Jewett's family had Irish servants. But the lower family, and Sarah Orne Jewett would give you a very good perspective on the old, the hardship. I think it was loneliness and isolation more than anything else.

JM: But I mean, say, when you moved here what was the hardship for women then?

AS: For me?

JM: Yeah.

JM: I had no idea.

JM: Or for women around you, not necessarily you.

AS: Oh. I don't know. My worst hardship was playing golf. [laugh] I don't know.

JM: But—

AS: I didn't know—

JM: But for, say women who lived up by Carolyn or—

AS: Probably the same kind of loneliness only they had radio then I suppose. And there were horse and wagon. I remember when I first came here there was an old gentleman up the road at 4 o'clock every day I could hear the clip walk. And he was going into town and he

had an overcoat that was green from age. And he died. He fell into a, during the storm he fell into the road and he broke his leg and lay there for a day and froze to death. So, we had that kind of thing, I suppose.

JM: Wow.

AS: But he went by horse and carriage and that was in the [19]50s.

JM: But I just mean, for women, um, I just wonder if in comparison to what you had seen in Long Island. The women here—

AS: Oh, it would never be that way in Long Island.

JM: But was it more traditional? Were the roles more traditionally entrenched here then where you were from? So that a woman like you would stand out more for being—

AS: Oh definitely. No question about it. Mm-hmm. Yeah, I was from another planet. Yeah, oh yes, that was quite a different—but it was a little farm community. They wouldn't know what it was to play a game of golf.

JM: I somehow recall that kind of like, hardship. Although maybe the woman who experienced it wouldn't have—

AS: I don't think they thought it was hardship. They had washing machines, even though they were funny old things, I guess. It wasn't as bad as the turn of the century you know. I would, to me it would be isolation. The—I know one thing. There was a proliferation of social clubs in New England. They had more social clubs than any other area. It was a way of communicating with one another. They have almost died off. It's very interesting. I think television, the radio probably did that. And the automobile. I taught a course on pop culture

once which was a great. I was wonderful. It was fun. I enjoyed it. And that, I think that the automobile changed the whole thing. Made a difference.

JM: And, umm—with, I'm wondering about, for a similar reason, I'm wondering about the Civil War monument in that I've read that often times Civil War monuments were erected by, umm, women's civic groups like—

AS: We're trying to find out. I can't find anything on it. Have you been able to find anything?

JM: I was just gonna ask you now.

AS: I can't find anything on it.

JM: So, this—

AS: Yeah. If I could, I should imagine if I could find an old town report I could find it. But I haven't had the time to go through one.

JM: Where in the town—are they in—

AS: The town office has some. They'd like to look at 'em.

JM: Yeah.

AS: But we'd have no—I would imagine they probably were done around the turn of the century or the late 1800s. They might, they might, it had to be a reference of the cost of it. And probably who did it. Someone called me recently to do some research on it but I had, I have no background on it at all.

JM: Um-hmm.

AS: Be interesting to find out. If you'll find out anything let me know.

JM: I will.

AS: Would do?

JM: Yeah, sure, sure.

AS: Good. Fair enough.

JM: Yeah, I think I'll go talk to them while he's still there.

AS: Good. And talk to the town office. They might be able to help.

JM: Yeah. It's just interesting. This one woman that came to speak at SALT said that a landmark that you can look for in terms of women's clubs, just sort of a sign that they were in evidence in a town is looking for Civil War monuments.

AS: [unclear] They put them up?

JM: Yeah. That's what she said.

AS: That's a good clue. I might be able to—There was a woman's club here for years. I don't think it exists anymore. Women's clubs were very prominent in small towns in New England.

JM: Do you think that—

AS: And garden clubs.

JM: Um-hmm.

AS: Both. But then to the best of my knowledge—the women's club may still exist, I'm not sure.

JM: How about—

AS: Wait a minute—they do because I gave a talk before them about five years ago. But for the life of me I couldn't tell you who represented them. I don't know. Maybe the town office could help you with that.

JM: Do you think that civic activity, just say like, the library or things like that have been ways for women—

AS: The library was a focus for every town. Every town had a library and a church. And they were the focus for social, for intellectual advancement. Every, every town in New England had that.

JM: Um-hmm. But in this town it seems like with yourself, and Carolyn, and Ruth, it's all women that do these kinds of things. And it seems like, especially for people who are really aware of a lot of the injustice around them and you need that kind of support. I mean I know from my own experiences—

AS: I think women have worked through men for the most part. I mean I think they've been the initiators. Probably the gatherers of the information and the techniques for doing things and probably then they work through the men. A long time ago, not a long time, maybe [19]20s, [19]30s, [19]40s.

JM: What do you think—

AS: Then, became very active themselves.

JM: Um-hmm. Do you think with yourself and Carolyn though that you've done that? It doesn't seem like it.

AS: Well, Maury helped a lot. Course, he had a business and he had a printing he had to [unclear]. He's an advertising man so we used him. Poor Maury. But he did lot of the white papers for us. We used to meet in his office in a small group and we'd all like, brainstorm, putting a white paper together. It was an exciting time. It was fun. I enjoyed it. I didn't like to see the bitterness that came out of it, but I let the chips fall where they may.

JM: I was talking to Mrs. Howarth and she was saying that church for her was real important.

AS: I imagine that church for many, many women was important. I am not a church goer. I feel that it's very divisive. Christianity never was expressed through churches for more money.

JM: I know, I mean I know for myself that um—I don't know, it seems like there's a really upside to activism. That there's a lot of successes and wonderful things. But I'm just wondering from your experiences what are the downsides? What are the hard parts—

AS: The downsides are the difficulty of opposing people in power. That's not easy. That's a very tough thing. But you do it. It builds character. [laugh]

JM: That's true.

AS: Gives you some backbone. Carolyn is, oh, she's wonderful. She's a real fighter. I'm a little different way. I keep flogging along. She's wonderful. Did she put you in touch with some older people?

JM: Um, that was Amy. Yeah, Amy was looking for older people and, um, Carolyn a while back had given me a whole list of names.

AS: Yeah.

JM: So, I was able to give Amy some of those.

AS: She's done a lot of personal charity work in town.

JM: Yeah.

AS: A lot, quietly.

JM: Hmm.

AS: And that's, that's what I meant when I said the other side of the things that I do is something with the church. Just quiet without recognition. And Carolyn does 10 times more than I do. She's wonderful. And a lot with older people.

JM: Seems like she almost needs to do that.

AS: Oh, she driven to it.

JM: Yeah.

AS: Well she made that business. They started on Highland Avenue in a little factory with eating hamburgers and they built it up into a several-million-dollar business now. Very successful. And she was the drive behind Maury.

JM: Do you think it was hard for her to let go of that?

AS: Oh, I don't think she still has. Not totally.

JM: Yeah.

AS: She's retired now though.

JM: Right.

AS: Never underestimate the power of a woman.

JM: It's interesting, It's so quietly.

AS: Quietly. Yeah.

JM: I was wondering, um, if there was any way I could see some of those signs.

AS: If you could what?

JM: You mentioned you had some signs—

AS: There in the garage there. Sure.

JM: Could it be possible to see some of those?

AS: Sure.

[end of transcript]